

## THE THEOLOGY OF IMAGES AND THE LEGITIMATION OF POWER IN EIGHTH CENTURY BYZANTIUM

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### *Introduction*

This paper considers some aspects of the relation between historical conditions and theological arguments raised in the Iconoclastic controversy, with reference, in the main, to the work of the two major iconodule writers, John of Damascus (c. 675-749) and Theodore the Studite (759-826). The former who came from an aristocratic Byzantine family, wrote from Mar Saba monastery, near Bethlehem, in Arab lands that were outside imperial control; in *Three apologies against those who cast down the icons*<sup>1</sup> he provided the most important systematic vindication of the iconodule position. Apart from being the most important of the Orthodox controversialists he is also the main figure (along with Patriarch Germanos) during the first stage of the iconoclastic controversy, which began with the accession of the Emperor Leo III the Isaurian in 717 and reached a first resolution in the Seventh Oecumenical Council's vindication of the iconodule position at Nicaea in 787, with the subsequent restoration of the great Icon of Christ *Antiphonitis* over the Bronze Gate to the Great Imperial Palace at Constantinople.

Theodore Studite,<sup>2</sup> who also came from an elite aristo-

<sup>1</sup>*Oratio* 1, J. P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* (henceforth PG) 94.1232-1284; *Oratio* 2, PG 94.1284-1317; *Oratio* 3, PG 94.1317-1420. See also *De Fide Orthodoxa*, 3, 88-89, PG 94.1164-1176. For E. T. see *St John of Damascus: On the Divine Images* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 1980).

<sup>2</sup>Composing the *Antirrhetikoi*; texts in PG 99. For E. T. see *St Theodore the Studite: On the Holy Icons* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 1981).

cratic background, was at first Abbot of the Saccoudion monastery in Bithynia and then of the Studium monastery in the capital, where, among other things, he and his monks are credited with introducing the minuscule script into manuscript tradition. He was exiled twice by Constantine VI (the tragic son of the iconodule Empress Eirene the Athenian), because he opposed the imperial divorce and remarriage, and a third time by the iconoclast monarch Leo V the Armenian (813-820), for his defense of the images. He was recalled by Michael II (820-829) in one of the lulls in the controversy, though not to reside in the capital. Theodore is the main Orthodox controversialist of the second phase of Iconoclasm (along with the iconodule but anti-Studite Patriarch Nikephoros). This began with Leo V's revival of iconoclastic policy in 813 and culminated on March 11, 843, with the solemn procession returning the icons to Hagia Sophia, an event which has subsequently been celebrated on the 1st Sunday of Lent in Eastern Christianity as the "Feast of Orthodoxy," and which represented the final triumph of the iconodule party.

This short paper cannot provide anything like a full historical and theological analysis of the issues involved. In any case, there exist several excellent generic synopses of the historical events of the period<sup>3</sup> as well as most useful surveys of the development of the theological argumentation of the Church on the question of religious images, up to and including the iconoclastic crisis.<sup>4</sup> Here selected aspects of the historical con-

<sup>3</sup>J. M. Hussey, *The Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire* (Oxford University Press, Oxford 1986), pp. 30f, and bibliographical notes *ibid* p. 372. J. Herrin, *The Formation of Christendom* (Oxford, 1987). A. Grabar, "L'Iconoclasm Byzantine," *Dossier Archéologique*, Paris 1957; G. Ladner, "The Origin and Significance of the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy," in *Medieval Studies*, 2 (1940), pp. 127-149; E. J. Martin, *A History of the Iconoclast Controversy*, London, 1930; G. Ostrogorsky, "Les débuts de la Querelle des Images," in *Mélanges C. Diehl*, vol. 1, Paris, 1930, pp. 235-53; A. Bryer and C. Herrin (Edd.) *Iconoclasm: Papers Given at the 9th Spring Symposium of Medieval Studies*, University of Birmingham, March 1975 (henceforth *Iconoclasm*): see especially "A Historical Introduction" by Cyril Mango in the same volume, pp. 1-6; P. Brown, "A Dark Age Crisis: Aspects of the Iconoclastic Controversy," *EHR*, 346, (1973), pp. 1-34. K. Parry, "Theodore Studites and The Patriarch Nicephoros on Image-making as a Christian Imperative," in *Byzantion*, 59 (1989), pp. 164-183.

<sup>4</sup>L. W. Barnard, "The Theology of Images," in *Iconoclasm*, pp. 7-13; *ibid*. "The Graeco-Roman and Oriental Background of the Iconoclastic Con-

text will be elaborated, to correlate what was happening in the world of Byzantine imperial politics with what was transpiring in the minds of its religious theorists over a period of 125 years. This century and a quarter was surely one of the most troubled eras in the whole of Byzantine history: the Arab threat and the power of Islam in the East, and the Lombard armies and the rise of the Carolingian dynasty in the West, converged to hem in and harry the Christian empire, causing it to question its identity and purpose more profoundly than at any other time since its inception.

### *Historical Contexts*

Something that must be highlighted is, of course, the national instability that circumscribes the whole controversy. Cyril Mango characterizes the period as "in almost every respect a dark age—an age marked by continuous dogged fighting against external enemies, an age that produced hardly any great literature or art."<sup>5</sup> Leo III (717-741), who began the dispute,<sup>6</sup> was a rough, militaristic emperor, elevated precisely as an antidote to these military and political insecurities. Before taking the throne he was a successful commander in the Caucasus campaign, and was then promoted to the office of Strategos of the Theme of Anatolia. His accession took place while the Arabs besieged the walls of Constantinople (717-718) for one year, in what was to be the inconclusive culmination of the second great onslaught they mounted against Byzantium from 716 onwards. After severely shaking the Byzantine confidence and reducing their Eastern land-holdings, the Arab power seemed a spent force by 678. Now, less than forty years later, they were once more literally at the gates of the capital.

trovery," *Byzantina Neerlandica* 5, Leiden, 1974; E. Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images in the Age Before Iconoclasm," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 8 (1954), pp. 83-150; G. Ladner, "The Concept of Image in the Greek Fathers and the Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 7 (1953), pp. 1-34; M. V. Anastos, "The Argument for Iconoclasm as Presented to the Iconoclastic Council of 754," in *Late Classical and Medieval Studies in Honor of A. M. Friend*, Princeton, 1954, pp. 177-188.

<sup>5</sup>C. Mango, *Iconoclasm*, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup>Leo was a native of Germanikeia, modern Maras, then near the Arab frontier; a Syrian, therefore, not an Isaurian as is commonly cited.

It was universally held in Byzantium that God's election had passed from the Jews to the Christians as the New Israel, and the biblical doctrine of God's providence over his elect people was more or less directly inherited as well. The forces of opposition, therefore, like the unbelieving hordes in the Old Testament, were seen as instruments of God's chastisement on the elect, who were meant to correct and punish, but would never wholly triumph over a people who had been definitively formed by a new covenant in Christ, one that would not be superseded. This form of Byzantine theodicy was theologically reinforced after the first wave of Arab invasions (674-678), but was very much shaken by the second. In the aftermath of the first Arab conquests it could well be thought, as Mango observes,<sup>7</sup> that a purification of Christian Orthodoxy had been divinely ordained: the Monophysites of Syria, Egypt and Armenia had fallen into the hands of Islamic overlords; the Orthodoxy of the Empire (which guaranteed that God would ensure Byzantium's peace, just as the keeping of the Torah was seen to ensure the peace of Israel in the Old Testament theodicy) was reinforced in that time by the Sixth Oecumenical Council of 680-681 and the Quinisext Council at Constantinople in 692, which promulgated rigorous reformatory canons. If the Arabs were again making ground at the beginning of the eighth century,<sup>8</sup> was not the reason that something was radically wrong with the Christian *oecumene* at large, and in particular with life in Constantinople, under whose walls the invaders had camped?

The iconodule writers tell us that two iconoclast Anatolian bishops, known to Leo III from his pre-imperial career, supplied a theological answer to the Emperor: it was the implicit idolatry of the churches of the capital, replete with icons, that was scandalizing Jew and Moslem alike and calling down God's anger on his Church.<sup>9</sup> Leo's transition from a Syriac/Aramaic

<sup>7</sup>C. Mango, *Iconoclasm*, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup>In 723-724 Ikonion fell to the Arabs. In 726-27 they took Caesarea and were besieging Nicaea (unsuccessfully) only 60 miles from Constantinople itself.

<sup>9</sup>Patriarch Germanos (715-730) identifies Constantine of Nakoleia in Phrygia, who followed Leo to become the imperial adviser, as the source of the whole movement; see his *De haeresibus et Synodis* PG 98.77.

speaking province on the Eastern borders of the heart of the capital must have exposed him to a considerable contrast of church experience—from the relative simplicity of worship in Anatolia to the great artistic richness and sophistication of Byzantium. The Anatolian bishops seemed to hold stark Judaeo-Christian attitudes to art, whereas in Byzantium the development of decoration and Christian symbolism had advanced considerably. The Anatolian approach also went hand in hand with Leo's perceived self-image, that is, that he should react against opulence, given by the fact he was a militaristic warlord bent on calling a sophisticated civilian population to astringency and discipline in the face of invasion.

But there is more to it than this. Something deeper seems to lie beneath Leo's appeal to Old Testament texts forbidding graven images (e.g., Exod 20:4). For him and his successor Constantine V (Coprnomos, 741-775),<sup>10</sup> this appeal to the unimpeachable authority of the Pentateuchal texts was a primary argument; to the iconodules it was erroneous Judaizing, and in this disagreement over the interpretation of key sources several interesting factors emerge.

The post-iconoclastic decoration of Orthodox churches is highly significant in that it is oriented entirely towards the New Testament. In other words, each mosaic or icon panel has its place within the church to demonstrate the inexorable process of the incarnational economy. This is seen in the ascending movement from the nave to the altar and presbyterium, in which the earthly economy of Christ is depicted and even upwards to the cupola where the eschatological Redeemer appears. The Old Testament scenes that appear, such as the life of Noah that so wonderfully decorates the narthex in San Marco at Venice, are outside the door. They are merely propaedeutic; and the figures of the prophets inside the church gain their place within the overall scheme precisely insofar

<sup>10</sup>For relevant texts see H. Hennephof (ed.) *Textus Byzantinos ad Iconomachian pertinentes*, Leiden, 1969; and S. Gero, "Byzantine Iconoclasm During the Reign of Constantine V, With Particular Attention to the Oriental Sources," in *Corpus Scriptorum Orientalium*, vol. 384, Subsidia 52, Louvain, 1977. See also M. V. Anastos, "The Ethical Theory of Images Formulated by the Iconoclasts in 754 and 815," in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 8 (1954), pp. 153-160.

as they lead to and explicate the mystery of this Christocentric economy. In short, what may appear to be operative in the contrasting exegeses of the iconoclasts and iconodules is a radically different understanding of the meaning of Christian theological tradition. The iconoclasts represent those who elevate the principle that "older means more authentic" while the iconodules represent a stance that holds two tensile principles together: "Living Tradition," two principles which do not systematically explain their mutual relationship either immediately or easily to the casual observer. This complex and important background lies behind the 1st iconoclastic council's collation (754) of scriptural and patristic proof-texts to support their veto on images, as does the fact that both John Damascene and Theodore Studite spend much time in providing positive scriptural and patristic testimonies to support their own position.

If one accepts a model of the tradition according to the iconoclastic form, then various other deductions appear admissible which certainly find their historical counterparts in the iconoclastic imperial policy of the period. For example, if all aspects of the tradition are equally authoritative—if that is, Exodus and Leviticus are scripturally speaking the sisters of the Gospels rather than their servants—then it follows that the theocratical principles established, say, in the *Book of Kings* and of *Psalms* must also continue authoritatively to inform the Christian politic. Such appears to be the understanding of the iconoclast rulers. The imposition of a religious policy for the empire is insisted upon as the preeminent right of the *Basileus* as Priest and King at this period. To understand this aright we need to look beyond the general context of what has become the clichéd view of Eastern Caesaropapism (despite the fact that one of the clearest indications of Leo III's political theology is given in his imperial rescripts of 730 commanding Pope Gregory II [715-730] to anathematize images and remove them from the churches). Leo's reply to the papal refusal relies directly on his status as King-Priest to make such prescriptions for the Church as a whole. The exchange of letters is fascinating and its integrity has come to be more generally agreed of late. Leo threatens to come and smash the statue of St Peter himself and imprison Gregory for his insolence and treachery;

and the correspondence concludes with the Pope telling the Emperor not to trouble himself with the journey, as the Campagna marshes are at hand for his escape. The final riposte is that Gregory will resist the Emperor's tyranny at any cost, and he prays that Christ may send a demon to torture the royal body so that at least his soul may be saved on the last day (as in 1 Cor 5:5). The papal attitude was, of course, partly explicable by the virtual collapse of the Byzantine hold over Northern and Central Italy, a collapse that finally sprang open the lock for a whole new political and ecclesiastical order in the West, with the Lombard seizure of Ravenna in 751 and the rise of the Carolingian dynasty. But Leo's theocratical views on the place of Kingship in the Christian *oecumene* mark a new shift, in that they are elaborated far more explicitly than his predecessors', and work on a directly applied Old Testament model. Such a theocratic tradition had within it the seeds of a messianic policy of the centralized absorption of all hieratic functions—the *Basileus* as the Royal Saviour of his people who was prophet, priest, and king in one. It would be churlish to suggest that Gregory II and Gregory III resisted such claims because they wished to appropriate them for the papacy. In any case, such totalitarian imperialisms were felt by many to reflect a defective understanding of the nature of the Christian communion. That such a massive centralization, and intent to focus all upon the royal city, was indeed behind Leo's religious policy and organizational reforms<sup>11</sup> has been sufficiently demonstrated elsewhere.<sup>12</sup>

Although the model Davidic King could almost do no wrong, and in the Psalms was even addressed as one of the

<sup>11</sup>The conflict with Gregory II allowed Leo a rationale for taking Illyricum from the Roman Patriarchate, but he also removed Isauria from Antioch and added both to the territories of the Constantinopolitan Patriarchate. In addition, he confiscated all Roman territory over which he still had control—effectively Sicily and Southern Italy. When Gregory III's synod of 731 anathematized the iconoclasts, he sent out a punitive fleet which was prevented from reaching Rome because of storms at sea which dispersed it.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. H. Ahrweiler, "The Geography of the Iconoclast World," in *Iconoclasm*, pp. 21-27. For Leo's general reforms as part of an overall campaign (e.g. baptizing the Jews forcibly and penalizing religious dissidents such as the Paulicians) to centralize imperial and ecclesiastical administration around his capital, see J. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, London, 1889, Bk. 6, ch. 2.

gods, there were other voices of protest in the biblical and patristic tradition to counter this tendency to absolutism in politics and theology. This may explain why it was the monks more than any other section of society who were a thorn in the side of the emperor and his iconoclastic policy. The monks' two greatest archetypes and religious heroes were Elijah and the Forerunner, John the Baptist. Both biblical figures defied the royalty of their day and represented a theocratic paradigm, in marked contrast to official Messianic policy, a paradigm in which the king fulfilled his religious role only insofar as he stood within the communion of the elect and not over it. The monks were also a society within a society, and not subject to the institutional channels of control which the emperor could command—particularly the army, but also the episcopate and the parish clergy, who generally did not give much trouble during the conflict. The monks were not, in the main, subject to the same fiscal and career pressures as the Byzantine establishment, and thus provided a fertile locus of political opposition.

During both iconoclastic periods, but especially when the suppression of dissidents was intensified between 762 and 768, the monks were particularly singled out for attack. In the end Iconoclasm became an attempt to suppress the monastic state as such. The author of the *Life of St Stephen the Younger*<sup>13</sup> speaks of large movements of exiles as well as the celebrated martyrdoms that form the heart of his apologia.<sup>14</sup> The writer says that in this period 342 monks were held in the Praetorian prison at Constantinople. Theophanes, in his *Chronographia*, tells of a Governor in Western Asia Minor (the Thrakesian Theme), called Michael Lachanodrakon, who wiped out almost all the monasteries within his territory. He gathered all the monks he could find in a playing field at Ephesus and offered them the choice of marriage, or blinding with exile to Cyprus. "Many defected and suffered perdition," laments the

<sup>13</sup>PG 100.1117, 1160.

<sup>14</sup>The anchorite Stephen was executed in 765; Constantine V's persecution was stepped up after 754. The monk Peter was scourged to death on 16th May 761; on June 7th of that year John the Abbot of Monagria, who refused to trample on an icon, was tied in a sack and thrown into the sea; the Cretan monk Andrew was flogged to death in 767. See also Germanos, PG 98.80, for aspects of the policy against dissidents in Leo's time.



chronicler.<sup>15</sup> In 766 captured monks were led in procession around the Hippodrome in Constantinople. The hostile crowd, who regarded Constantine V as a hero who had brought them military success and financial security (he lowered the taxes), jeered derisively as the monks were brought in and paraded, each tied hand in hand with a woman—a not too unhappy condition, one might think. This display was probably designed, like the Ephesus incident, to serve as a public betrothal ceremony which would legally invalidate their monastic profession.

Monasticism espoused the iconodule cause not merely because the monks were a very conservative force within Orthodoxy, not ready to bow to the latest policies of the day, but arguably also because they represented a wholly different perspective on the question of authentic tradition which underlay the primary argument of both sides in the controversy. If the imperial policy advanced as a self-confident attempt to repair the theocratic status of Byzantium, the monks advanced another view by their lifestyle and protests: "Here we have no abiding city" (Heb 13:14). They preserved aspects of the eschatological roots of Christianity that refused to allow a direct correlation of the Kingdom of God with the Church visible on earth. Their apocalyptic life-style of detachment, together with their veneration of the saints as those who had stepped through doors of history into a fuller reality of the Church's existence, and their appreciation of the icons as windows whereby that other world of reality kept invading this one,<sup>16</sup> all amounted to a theological overview that rejected the straightforward promise that God's kingdom on earth was coterminous with the Byzantine imperial interest.

It is in this interconnection of theological ideas that we find the reason the iconoclastic party rejected not only icons but also the cult of relics and the invocation of saints. It may also explain another aspect of the whole controversy—the fact that just as the monks were the most coherent iconodule party, the army was consistently iconoclastic.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Theophanes, *Chronographia*, 445.

<sup>16</sup>The icon is "a door opening the God-created mind to the likeness of the original within," *Life of St Stephen the Younger*, PG 100.1113.

<sup>17</sup>An oath to uphold the iconoclastic policy had been imposed on the army in 766, but attempts to make it more widespread throughout the populace

In a penetrating assessment S. Brock draws out some of the theological implications of iconoclasm, and concludes: "I would like to suggest that the real but unvoiced issue underlying the whole iconoclast controversy has nothing at all to do with Christology, and very little (directly at least) with the legitimacy of images. It is rather a question of how far the divine is allowed to impinge on the human world. The Iconoclasts wished to confine the sphere of divine influence—to put it that way—to certain given areas, in particular the Eucharist and the saints, not allowing it to spill out untidily into other areas where humanity was perfectly well in control."<sup>18</sup> This understanding of the issue is, I think, very much to the point, although perhaps one need not subscribe too much to the apparent willingness here to divorce the text and subtext so readily (that is, the divorce between high theological principles and the socio-political issues involved), for it was part of the essential genius of the Byzantines to hold them both in such close and natural correlation. The central thrust of this assessment seems right, because it is not so much an argument about the divine presence in the world in general, but rather about what Brock refers to briefly as "impinging," what we might elaborate more fully as a doctrine of providence.

Rooted in the Old Testament conception of the elected covenant people was the straightforward notion of a divine providence that protected the elect while they were faithful, and chastened them when they erred. When in the summer of 726 a massive submarine eruption took place in the Aegean Sea between Thera and Therasia, Leo III seems to have interpreted it as a divine judgment on the Christian world, in a providential assessment that comes directly from the Deuteronomistic historian, or the post-exilic prophets' analysis of the collapse of Israel.

It was this event that seems to have inaugurated his policy

failed. The army, however, was so doggedly against the icons (with some exceptions, as Ahrweiler points out in *Iconoclasm*, pp. 21-27) even when imperial policy changed, as under Eirene, that other explanations than the oath are needed.

<sup>18</sup>S. Brock, "Iconoclasm and the Monophysites," in *Iconoclasm*, pp. 53-57 (see p. 57).

of opposition to the icons, and that same year<sup>19</sup> he destroyed the Icon of Christ over the *Chalke Gate* of the Palace. This famous icon was ostensibly being insulted by soldiers, making it necessary for the emperor to remove it "for reasons of safety"; but the subterfuge did not prevent a serious fracas between the army and the civilian protesters who clashed on that occasion.

The incident is revealing. Leo III had no desire to use the icons as Palladia in his battle array. Whether or not he really attributed the military troubles of the Empire to their presence, we can certainly deduce that he did not rely on their efficacy to reestablish secure borders. If this is so, he surely saw no advantage to himself whatsoever in attributing military success to the Virgin, or the saints' intervention. The credit for reestablishing military security was to go to himself and his soldiery. In fact this stood as the only possible reason to validate and secure his own position on the throne.

If the imperial religious policy advanced an Old Testament kind of theocracy focused on the king as God's sacred mediator on earth, it had, however, one serious disadvantage to overcome: the fact that Leo III usurped the dynasty, and his entire legitimacy depended on his ability to deliver a military solution to the Arab problem. Even so, there was an Old Testament prototype for such a move, to which he appeals in his self-characterization as David. Did not David, the charismatic warlord, overthrow the failed anointed king Saul along with all his household, in the interests of recovering Israel's fortunes against its enemies? This kind of politico-theological centralization around the king and his court seems very much to be at play behind the iconoclastic position, and it is perhaps not coincidental that images of the king, or popular objects of royal favor such as leading charioteers, were often substituted for the public icons that were removed in Byzantium.<sup>20</sup>

An almost mirror image of this situation can be seen in the second stage of Iconoclasm. Compared with the iconoclast

<sup>19</sup>Or possibly in 730; see M. V. Anastos, "Leo III's Edict Against the Images in the Year 726-727 and Italo-Byzantine Relations Between 726 and 730," in *Polychordia Festschrift F. Dölger*, Vol. 3, *Byzantinische Forschungen*, 1968, pp. 5-41.

<sup>20</sup>See C. Mango, "Historical Introduction," pp. 1-6 of *Iconoclasm*.

Emperor Constantine V, beloved by his soldiers and people alike as a highly successful general, the series of iconodule rulers that followed—Eirene (780-802), Nikephoros I (802-811), and Michael I Rhangabes (811-813)—had all been military disasters. Nikephoros had been killed by the Bulgarian Khan Krum the Sublime, and Michael fled to the capital in ignominious retreat from the Bulgarians, where he was promptly forced by the troops to abdicate. The general who replaced him was the iconoclast Leo V the Armenian (813-820). At this time his courtier Theodotos Melissenos Cassiteras, and the abbot John the Grammarian, both subsequent iconoclastic patriarchs, persuaded Leo that the military threats were God's renewed anger against the image-worshippers; and once more the great icon over the *Chalke Gate* was pulled down, initiating the second phase of the crisis in 814.

This interpretation of providence as being directly correlated to the religious Orthodoxy of the Empire can be found behind most of the religious policies of the earlier rulers of Byzantium. The *Sacra* of the Emperor Theodosius II (408-450) convening the Council of Ephesus gives a clear example of this kind of thinking. What seems to be different in the case of the iconoclast rulers is the peculiar pressure put upon the theory by the military advances of the Arabs, Lombards, and Bulgarians on all sides around Byzantium, leading to a new impetus being given to the figure of the Emperor, the *Basileus*, as the one primary focus of God's salvation of the Empire—even, perhaps, the last hope of salvation. It is a theological position which, as we have seen, is rooted in an Old Testament theodicy. To what extent, however, does it correspond to the explicit concerns of the Orthodox theological apologists of the period? A consideration of the arguments of John of Damascus and Theodore Studite may assist us at this point.

### *The Arguments of the Iconodules*

#### (a) *The Argument from Tradition*

Both writers give pride of place in their defense of icon veneration to the notion of tradition. The Old Testament prohibi-

tions of image worship are explained as referring strictly and solely to the adoration of graven objects as gods.<sup>21</sup> Both theologians expose as the primary foundation of their more specific argument (that the proscription of the Book of Exodus is wholly inapplicable to icons) the more profound doctrine of tradition—that there is not a direct and inexorable line of continuity between the Old and New Testaments. For Theodore, Moses has “a rough sketch in symbolic visions”<sup>22</sup> of what is to come, and the injunctions were given “before the age of grace, and to those who were confined under the law and were still having to be taught the basics of the monarchy of one person.”<sup>23</sup>

John of Damascus had earlier elaborated this argument more thoroughly than the Studite and established a considerable body of biblical and patristic testimonies to substantiate his point at the end of each of his three *Orations* defending the images.<sup>24</sup> Between 726 and 730, over and against the iconoclast argument that there was no respectable tradition for the veneration of images in Christianity, but decidedly a tradition against it,<sup>25</sup> the Damascene collected his written sources, one of the most famous being the text of Basil the Great on the unity of the Father and the Son. This became a standard, as it were, of the iconodule party.<sup>26</sup> He makes the point that the Old Testament prohibition of images now only applies, after the incarnation of God in Christ, to the pictorial representation of the invisible God as such—an obvious absurdity anyway since He is ever fleshless, uncircumscribed, and unimaginable. But insofar as God has been incarnated in Christ He can now legitimately be depicted, and this material circumscription that the artist accomplishes is analogous to the self-limitation of God in the materiality of the incarnate life.

The image restricts God no more than the body of Christ restricts the Logos who dwells within it, since God is in the

<sup>21</sup>John Damascene, *De Fide Orthodoxa*, PG 94.1169; Theodore Studite, *Antirrhetikos* 1.5, PG 99.333.336.

<sup>22</sup>*Antirrhetikos* 1.6, PG 99.336f.

<sup>23</sup>*Antirrhetikos* 1.5, PG 99.333-336.

<sup>24</sup>*Oratio* 1, PG 94.1257f; *Oratio* 2.20f, PG 94.1305f; *Oratio* 3.24g; PG 94.1357-1420.

<sup>25</sup>Mansi, *Amplissima Collectio Conciliorum Oecumenicorum*, 13, 800A. See some of the key texts in E. T. collected at the end of *Iconoclasm*, p. 180f.

<sup>26</sup>Basil, *De Spiritu Sancto* 18.45, PG 32.145.

flesh but not contained by it.<sup>27</sup> He goes on to argue that the unwritten tradition is as important as Scripture "and of great moment" for the life and direction of the Church's life.<sup>28</sup> He draws examples from such basic unwritten things as the three-fold immersion in Baptism, the doctrine of the consubstantiality of the Trinitarian hypostases, and prayer facing the East.<sup>29</sup> He concludes that the unanimous teaching of the Fathers must be considered as vital and binding in the proper interpretation of the divine Economy.<sup>30</sup>

In this theological analysis the discontinuities between the Old and New dispensations are underscored. It is the process of the Christ economy which interprets the data for John, and it is a process which is revealed for him in the developing life of the Church's most spiritual members (the Fathers and saints who have been initiated more completely than others into the Christ Life). These are the true and expert interpreters of the data relevant to the economy of Christ, a gift not available to all and sundry or exclusively to those in high office. This implies that these spiritual heroes are the ones who alone can rightly see further into the inscrutable plans of God's providence for the world, which is again but a part of the great mystery in Christ. This includes the fortunes of Byzantium but is not exhausted by it, a fact on which John had cause to ponder, given that he enjoyed his religious freedom precisely because he lay outside the reach of the Christian *Basileus*.

This stress on the necessity of a spiritual interpretation of the discontinuities involved in historical revelation quite clearly contrasts with the theodicy arguments of the iconoclasts. With the iconodules we have a tradition of interpretation which is localized in a broad community across time, space and society, rather than being focused on one agent or relying on any discrete and mechanically simple system of interpreting God's

<sup>27</sup>J. Meany, *The Image of God in Man According to the Doctrine of John Damascene*, Manila 1954; also L. W. Barnard, *Iconoclasm*, pp. 7-13. Theodore Studite repeats this argument in *Antirrhetikos* 1.12, PG 99.344.

<sup>28</sup>*Oratio* 1.23, PG 94.1256.

<sup>29</sup>Patriarch Nikephoros extends the list of unwritten traditions: fasting before communion, crowning at weddings, the liturgical cycle. Cf. *Antirrhetikos* 3, PG 100.388.

<sup>30</sup>*Oratio* 2.16, PG 94.1301f.

will. The theory, while addressing the nature and authority of Christian tradition, also strikes directly at the iconoclastic emperors' pretensions to interpret God's will for the Church and localize His salvific action in their royal policies.

(b) *Representation Theory*

A second crux of the arguments of the iconodules is what we may call representation theory. John of Damascus elaborates a full-scale hierarchy of the different types of images that exist in heaven and on earth, and their consequent functions. L. W. Barnard has already admirably exposed the form of the argument,<sup>31</sup> and here I will only synopsise briefly in his words.

The difference between iconoclast and iconodule is fundamental to the understanding of the controversy. The iconoclasts held that a material object could be the habitation of a spiritual being—that the *ousiai* of both coalesced into one *ousia*—thus worship of any image was inevitably in the nature of idolatry. Against this the iconodules laboured to show that, however close the connection between image and original, their *ousiai* were different—hence the worship of images was legitimate, and this worship would be referred to the prototype. This was essentially a Platonic view.<sup>32</sup>

One might add that the “Platonism” of such an approach had been substantially refracted for the Byzantine iconodules, through the lens of Pseudo-Dionysian theology, which is an extremely important context of thought for the whole debate.<sup>33</sup>

One of the key arguments for the iconodules, which as we have seen was reapplied from Basil the Great's Christology, was that veneration of images passes directly to the prototype. An encounter with an icon of Christ was, therefore, in some sense, an encounter with Christ. But once again, as was the

<sup>31</sup>“The Theology of Images,” pp. 7-13 in *Iconoclasm*.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>33</sup>For a modern general assessment see A. Louth, *Denys The Areopagite*, London, 1990.

case with their concept of providence, it was not a straightforward or mechanical kind of encounter—one that could be transactionally guaranteed. For the iconodules resisted the central and straightforward “identity of *ousia*” argument of the iconoclasts that a true image of a thing had in a real sense to be that thing. They proposed, on the contrary, a much more sophisticated and far-ranging hierarchy of imaging and representation. At one and the same time they affirm the closeness of the encounter between the worshipper and the spiritual reality the icon depicts (that is, that the icon can be a sacrament of divine presence) as well as radically affirming the discontinuity of the presence (the worship is always given to the prototype and not to the representation, precisely because of the spiritual distance that is involved in the need to have an image in the first place).

Patriarch Nikephoros (806-815)<sup>34</sup> attributes the iconoclastic view of the identity of *ousia* between symbol and prototype to the Emperor Constantine V himself.<sup>35</sup> In arguing such a premise the royal theologian allowed only for a very narrow range of sacramental representations, usually the Cross, the Eucharist,<sup>36</sup> and the church building. The iconoclasts stripped the churches and argued that only abstract forms, or the very lack of images, were able to convey the spiritual reality of God's presence in human life—whether it be that of Christ, the Virgin and saints, or the lives of ordinary Christians.

In a certain sense this too had considerable political repercussions. If Constantine V was right, then there was no room for the image and the reality alongside one another in a parallel dislocation, such as that argued by the iconodules. Yet the

<sup>34</sup>Nikephoros' apologetic writings can be found in PG 100.201-850; his *History* is in PG 100.876-994; and the *Chronographia* may be found in PG 100.995-1060. See also P. J. Alexander, *The Patriarch Nikephoros of Constantinople: Ecclesiastical Policy and Image Worship in The Byzantine Empire*, Oxford, 1958.

<sup>35</sup>PG 100.225.

<sup>36</sup>A eucharistic theory which Theodore Studite took to be a typical indication of the iconoclastic weakness in their theory of images, since he argued that the Eucharist is not a *symbol* of presence but a *cause* of the presence; not an *icon* of Christ but the *power* of God's presence given in a sacrament: PG 99.339; also Poem 31, PG 99.1792. Cf. Nikephoros, *Antirrhetikos* 2, PG 100.336; and S. Gero, “The Eucharistic Doctrine of the Byzantine Iconoclasts and its Sources,” *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, 1975, 4-22.



iconodules, in arguing for this dynamic sense of dislocated presence, were making the important point that one must never mistake this contemporary time-bound reality for the truth of God's plan for the world, of which it is at best the imperfect symbol. In short, their doctrine of parallel but discontinuous representation kept alive the important memory that the image existed only because the Church was waiting for the return of its one Lord, and the icons served to keep his throne free from all who might like to usurp it.

In the iconoclastic policy the vital or "substantial" icons of God among mankind were far fewer, less available to the ordinary people, and by being so restricted were to that extent far more prominent and important. What is largely unstated, but perhaps quite evident in practice, is that the royal personage himself becomes a primary "living icon" of Christ the Pantocrator. And once again the emperor's salvific rule is set out as the substantial manifestation of Christ's work of ordering the *oecumene*.

This, of course, the logic of the iconodule position would not allow. With its sense of parallel discontinuity and imperfect yet real presence, it retained a very healthy sense of the difference between the rule of Christ and that of the emperor.

I would suggest that this is again another aspect of the monks' collective eschatological memory. It is something at the heart of Christian eschatology: whether the Ascension of Christ left any "power vacuum" to fill that might justify any hieratic or regal absolutism. The iconodule monks spoke for Orthodoxy as a whole when they decisively rejected such an implication. In this they held to the Pauline eschatology and his vision of the risen and ascended Lord of the world who never abdicated his power and needed no earthly successor to continue his mission; and by maintaining this theology they refused to allow the emperor to go too far in claiming divine sanction for his actions. In the old Byzantine tradition the imperial throne was of double size. This was not to accommodate the Empress, the *Basilissa*, but the Gospel Book, the symbol of Christ's presence on the throne. In times, perhaps, when a strong man of broad girth was needed to sit securely on that throne, such as in the period we are considering, the temptation would be great for

such a ruler to assume more of the seat space than a Christian theodicy ought ever to allow. The iconodule argument for discontinuous presence effectively vetoed the iconoclastic subtext that God's power, as in the case of David, flowed directly from the royal throne. They had a very different attitude indeed,<sup>37</sup> and passionately contested the emperor's rights to be over the Church as David was over Israel, an attitude which abundantly explains the imperial animus against them.

### (c) *Circumscribability*

The third great argument of the iconodules is represented mainly by Theodore Studite. He takes over much of what John of Damascus constructed, but advances new concerns to meet the needs of his day. Constantine V evidently set the iconoclast position on a much more articulated level when he made the debate turn around the question of uncircumscribability.<sup>38</sup> The main argument of the iconoclastic council of Hiereia in 754<sup>39</sup> was that God is uncircumscribable in time and space and therefore cannot be depicted. Christ is God. Therefore Christ is uncircumscribable and cannot be depicted either. Any attempted depiction would be heretical, for it would either be Nestorian (showing a human Christ separated from his divine nature) or Monophysite (showing a Christ whom the artist thought of as a confused kind of humanized God).

Theodore Studite assembles a range of subtle replies to this position of his *Three Refutations*. At their root they turn around the conception that the iconoclasts have failed to take the incarnation seriously enough. Theodore reflects both accusations of christological heresy and argues in return that the rigid christological categories that seem to be operative in the iconoclast position are themselves a form of Monophysitism—

<sup>37</sup>John Damascene: *Oratio* 2.12, PG 1296-97.

<sup>38</sup>The word had a deliberate double meaning: (a) that which cannot be grasped by thought or any other power and as such an essential attribute of God; (b) that which cannot be drawn around and hence cannot be "written" as an iconographer (lit. icon-writer) would wish to do.

<sup>39</sup>Preserved in the definition (*Horos*) of the Council of Nicaea in 787. Text in E. T. in the Anthology given in *Iconoclasm*, p. 184 (original in Mansi: *Amplissima Collectio Conciliorum Oecumenicorum* 13.252).

a Docetic type of the heresy which either suspects Christ's tangibility, or regards it as not of very profound significance in the encounter between God and man in Christ.<sup>40</sup>

Brock argues that in the cross-accusations of Monophysitism what was really at issue was the desire of the iconoclasts "to confine the sphere of the divine interference . . . to certain given areas, in particular the Eucharist, and the saints, not allowing it to spill out untidily into other areas where humanity was perfectly well in control."<sup>41</sup> This aspect of the imperial policy represents a highly ordered, if not rigid, view of how the world is, with concomitant expectations of how God ought to conduct Himself within it. It is a strictly hierarchical and centralist view, and it accords perfectly with all the policies of a military and imperial attempt to bring order and discipline to a complex and very subtle society, in a world that seemed to refuse to obey expected rules. In one sense any attempt at such an intellectual prescription from on high was doomed from the outset in Byzantium, where two Greeks meant three opinions even if only one might be believed. But in a wider sense this third aspect of the controversy again represents the iconodule's resistance to a royal policy that viewed society and Church as no more than a chain of command. The iconodules stood for untidiness, for a paradoxical theology of the uncircumscribable God circumscribing Himself freely and communicating with mankind in the fragile medium of the flesh. The monks, the most untidy members of Byzantine society in every sense, were the perfect agents to effect this protest: their own ideals and internal organization (a monasticism which had always set individual freedom at a high premium) formed the natural counterweight to the militaristic and regimented medium of iconoclasm.

### *Conclusion*

I would like to suggest as a general conclusion that there were, at the heart of the iconoclastic controversy, issues at stake

<sup>40</sup>Cf. Alice Gardner, *Theodore of Studium*, London, 1905; S. Brock, *Iconoclasm*, pp. 53-57.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 57.

beneath the surface arguments that were recognized as being of central importance for the Christian *oecumene*. The frequently expressed Western view that this was a storm about peripheral issues—Byzantine paintings and nothing more—is, ironically, a perspective on Byzantium that is curiously foreshortened and lacks graphic depth. Iconoclasm is largely an imperial and capital-centered dispute. Random images in Christian tradition, drawn largely from Old Testament perspectives on theocracy, had been reasserted by a dynasty that was urgently seeking central control and consolidation of the imperial domains against massive outside threat. Even in the face of pressing political needs, the iconodule theorists stood up the icons as *Palladia* against the Emperor's encroachment into that space on the royal throne held inviolably for Christ. They opposed a rigid, puritanical and militaristic view of reality, and fought for a view of the world in which God and His saints walked in myriad-hued bright robes, and stepped freely in and out of the doors and windows of ordinary life in all strata of society. In the exigencies of the eighth-century political situation, one might rightly be tempted to ask, of what use were monks? Of what use was art and culture? But the monastic iconodules would not listen to their own theoretical dismissal in the cause of totalitarian tidiness, and military and fiscal efficiency. In their spirited opposition they restated valuable truths about the nature of the exercise of authority in Christian society.

Finally, in the way they resisted the implication that all the ills of the empire were due to their idolatrous worship of icons, they represented a refusal to read the workings of divine providence directly from the immediate historical and political context of the day. This reaffirmed the position that identifying the ways of God is a complex business, far from mechanically assured. Such a mechanical assurance is not only a sign of spiritual immaturity, but can lapse into a self-congratulatory theory that simply identifies God's purposes with the needs and aspirations of the ascendant group. In defending these important Christian insights the Byzantine iconodules served a function that has abiding relevance, which is not least among the reasons why the Eastern Church elevated the triumph of 843 into the Feast of Orthodoxy *par excellence*.